



Natomas Oral Histories

2015/027

Oral interview of

Longer's Landscaping

with **Jim Longer, Tim Longer,
Amelia Longer, and Jimmy Longer Jr.**

April 11, 2012, and November 5, 2012

Interviewer: Anne Z. Ofsink

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Anne: Today is April 11, 2012. I am interviewing the Longers over at Longer's Landscaping on Northgate Blvd. and Garden Highway. I am here with Jimmy and Timmy Longer. Tell me about when your family came here to the area.

Jim: I think they came in about 1948. They settled on Bannon Street in Dos Rios, and I was born. I went to Dos Rios Elementary School, graduated sixth grade, and then went to Rio Tierra and Norte Del Rio.

Anne: Ok, so Rio Tierra here on Northgate and then Norte Del Rio. So had you moved to this area or were you still living over in Dos Rios?

[00:01:07]

Jim: We were still living in Dos Rios.

Anne: Ok. Alright.

Jim: When I graduated I got a part-time job, after that I went into the Army until I was 25.

Anne: Ok, so August 25 — what year?

Jim: 1969, I went into the service, and I came out in 1975. During 1975, I was stationed at the Army Depot. My dad bought this property; he bought it on a Saturday and he passed away on that Sunday.

Anne: Wow! His idea. I was looking back at an article — you were remembering it also. Where was the article published?

Jim: It went in the *Natomas Journal*.

Anne: Ok. The Natomas newspaper at that time. We were talking about it earlier, and it said that your dad wanted an opportunity for his family to have a business of their own where they could work together.

Jim: Yes.

Anne: So you had gotten out in 1975, and he bought the property, signed for it, and then your dad passed.

Jim: Yes.

Anne: So the two of you, Timmy were you starting it all at that time too or was it mostly Jimmy that was doing the initial part.

Tim: It was both of us. I worked here and at the California Almond Growers. Two jobs—

Anne: Timmy, I'm not sure with you across the room just what is getting picked up on the tape recorder. I'll check back with you later. Ok, Jim, so you came out here. You were saying you were not quite sure about what to do with the property.

[00:03:28]

Jim: Yes, I was confused about what to do with the property. It was a vacant lot. I was in the Army not sure whether to get out of the Army or not, and I'd come out here to the lot trying to think about what to do. I worked on the property in 1974; I figured the only thing I knew how to do was working on trucks, or driving trucks. I didn't know anything about rock, sand, or gravel. *[Laughter]* It was kind of an interesting deal. I figured maybe we could do something in the landscaping business. I didn't know anything about it, nothing at all.

Anne: Yes.

Jim: I put a fence up and tried to get my permits. I learned as I went along. I worked at the Army Depot and at night I'd come out here, fired my dump truck up and made a couple of deliveries, when I got them, until 10-11 at night. It was interesting.

Anne: Wow, very nice. You were saying that you came out here, cleared grass and people were wondering what you were doing.

Jim: Yes. I was cutting trees down, pouring concrete. A couple of my friends came down and helped me. They came and sometimes my wife came down too to help.

Anne: Ok. What is your wife's name?

Jim: Amelia. Yes, she helped quite a bit and encouraged me to keep on going.

Anne: Excellent. So when you talk about walls — is it the three-sided structures seen here? So in the inside you could put gravel or whatever material—

Jim: Concrete storage bins for the rock, sand and gravel.

Anne: Ok.

Jim: So we kind of pieced it together, piece by piece as we developed the property. We had one trailer as our office. Old man Gates, who lived down the street on American, helped us a lot.

Anne: There was another neighbor you spoke about, a concrete man.

Jim: He was an old, old man but would come down to the office and help us. He helped us get a permit to build an office. We didn't know about a business license, taxes, Board of Equalization or the EPA. We wondered, when is it going to end? He encouraged us to keep going, also. A guy who was living in an abandoned trailer who wore a cowboy hat with a feather in it saw our confusion about putting tresses up. He helped us put them up. The next day we went to pay him and "like an angel" he was gone. Not too many inspectors helped us, city inspectors. Some of them were good and some were bad.

Anne: Yes. *[Laughter]*

[00:06:10]

Jim: We just kept plugging along. We got the building up, poured more concrete; we got some friends to help us do some asphalt work. Finally we were able to put a warehouse in. We just continued on piece by piece.

Anne: So as you got business you were able to put more money into your business.

Jim: Yes. Dad taught us to save our money. So as we could, we built another bin. People would let us, not borrow money, but pay them as we could. As money came in we spent it on the business.

Anne: Right. You were saying it was really helpful when the Natomas area started building up. You had been supplying people in the Northgate Gardenland area but then as the other parts of Natomas started building up you were getting more business from them.

Jim: Oh yes. At first Northgate Blvd. was really small. You'd probably only see 10-15 cars during the whole day.

Anne: Wow.

Jim: We could almost see the new airport out there *[Laughter]*; there were almost no homes, just a few farms. When did they start *[glancing at Tim]*, '78 or '79?

Tim: Yes, they did start building the new homes in '78-'79.

Jim: That's when they started to build the new homes. *Natomas Journal* helped us advertise; that really helped us. We made a lot of friends over the years as people came to buy things from us.

Anne: So the Tretheways, Judy and Ray Tretheway helped with advertising.

Jim: Yes, with the *Natomas Journal* they helped us in the Natomas area. They helped by making people in the new neighborhood become familiar with us. As those new people came in and the older people in the Northgate Gardenland area continued to come, it really inspired us to keep going.

Anne: Excellent. I'm looking here at my notes — we talked about your dad, Bob Longer, and your mom, Dorothy Longer, really wanted you kids to work together and have something for you and future generations.

Jim: Yes.

[00:08:39]

Anne: So it was you, the oldest, Timmy here and then your sister, Cherry Mae? Jim you were in the Army, Timmy, you were working for the California Almond Growers, and "Cher-Mae" was working for the State of California.

Jim: Yes.

Anne: Earlier, did all three of you go to the schools that you spoke about?

Jim: Yes.

Anne: At that time you were not living out here, but is it true that at some point everyone moved out here?

Jim: Yes, my dad moved into the Gardenland area, *[looking at Timmy]* wasn't it about 1969?

Tim: '69 or '70.

Jim: Like I said when I got out of the service my dad and mom were already out here. He had been looking for a piece of property for a business that I would help them with. He then passed away.

Anne: Right.

Jim: I was stunned as to what to do with the land.

Anne: It would be stunning just to have your dad pass away unexpectedly! Let alone having just signed papers for this property, which he possibly had some ideas about.

Jim: The other funny thing about it was we thought we bought the whole corner. We didn't realize at that time that we didn't own all of it. So when I started clearing out the lot I worked on the whole corner lot. This old man came along and said, "What are you kids doing here?" I said, "I'm cleaning my dad's property up." He said, "Well, this part belongs to me."

Anne: Ah.

Jim: We talked it out and eventually we convinced him to sell a part of his property to us. We thought we had bought the whole thing.

[00:11:10]

Anne: The next street over, is that Jefferson? So were you saying that you thought your property went all the way to Jefferson Street?

Jim: No, there was 80 feet difference between what we thought we had bought and what we actually bought initially. The old man got aggravated with us at the beginning, but he ended up selling us the part that we wanted.

Anne: Very good. You mentioned that on this property, when you were a child, there were little cabins that lined the street here. What do you suppose they were used for? Persons who worked the fields?

Jim: Yes. Tomato pickers and cannery workers, and SP workers.

Anne: Oh, Southern Pacific workers.

Jim: They were just little cabins and people rented them.

Anne: Interesting.

Tim: Back in '74 this lot was vacant and behind the lot were cabins and the big house where the Baez family lived.

Jim: Then the cabins were torn down. Bercut Richards people lived there sometimes.

Anne: Then across the street from here I've been told that there was this triangle of land where other people lived.

Jim: Yes, there were a bunch of cabins there and an old trailer park. Shacks.

Anne: I've been told that people who were making some nice outdoor furniture lived there.

Jim: I don't know if they lived there or not. I remember the guy who sold furniture, and his son.

Anne: Ok. For social life when you lived in Dos Rios did you come out here to try to connect with people?

Jim: A lot of kids from high school lived out here that I knew. I had a girlfriend out this way. We mostly though stayed out in Dos Rios.

Anne: Oh, right, that makes sense.

Jim: We knew a lot of people in both areas.

[00:14:27]

Anne: Certainly, since you went to school out here, but lived most of your childhood in Dos Rios.

Jim: A lot of people have moved out of the area. I was gone for eight years so there was a lot of change when I came back.

Anne: Oh, right. The business you said started small and when you got more money you put it into the business. There was some issue with not knowing what to do with getting permits, for example. You said people helped you, made you aware of what to do so you would be able to do it the next time.

Jim: *[Laughter]* Yes, basically we had some help and had a lot of good times. The neighbors and friends came around and helped which kept us going. We didn't have the knowledge or the funds to get a big cement mixer, so most of the work was done with a little cement mixer or by hand. We'd get one in and then a couple more and that's how it went. We had good times. The neighborhood really helped us; we met a lot of people. Some were good and some were bad.

Anne: Good. Yes. So you did good.

Jim: Yes, it was a good time. Overall I think it is good experience for someone.

[00:16:55]

Anne: So the two of you have been basically doing it together. In the other article it mentioned that "Cher-Mae," as you call your sister sometimes, helped with the bookwork and other office functions.

Jim: That's right, paperwork and answering phones.

Anne: Did you hire other people along the way, or has it been mostly family?

Jim: We hired some people, too. We hired people to pour concrete.

Anne: So you hired people.

Jim: Truck drivers; we hired truck drivers when we needed them. At one time we had six trucks running; now we have two trucks. We hired a lot of young kids from the neighborhood to help clean up, sweep the yard. Some of them were good and some of them were bad. Some of them learned quite a bit from us.

Anne: I'm sure they did. I'll bet they appreciated being able to work with some people who had started a business.

Jim: Yes. We had to teach them a lot. Some even came back to us later, even 25 years later, to thank us for helping them out. Some of these kids were having a rough time and knowing they could come here to work helped them. Also, one guy was an engineering student at Sac State and based on what we told him we needed he drew up a blueprint for our office for one of his classes. It was a win-win situation.

Anne: That's really nice. Many of us are a bit off-course initially, just making our way.

Jim: Yes.

Anne: Ok, let's see here, I don't want to take up so much of your time. You were talking about some challenges and then we talked about a few highlights. So challenges sometimes was the permits, having the money to move forward, being able to manage the orders that came in sometimes if you were doing other jobs and things like that. And then some of the highlights you were talking about was meeting people and—

[00:19:19]

Jim: Yes, meeting people. Sometimes I think it's kind of funny, when I came out of the service and whatnot, trying to get the banks — not very many bankers, Bank of America was here — trying to get them to loan us some money. It was difficult if you had no collateral.

Anne: Yes.

Jim: During that time Gardenland was, I don't want to say that it was still a depressed area, but low key, no development going on.

Anne: Yes.

Jim: So bankers would look at us as if to say, "You want us to loan you some money so you can start a gravel yard out there, what is wrong with you?"

Anne: Yes, I can imagine the difficulty.

Jim: Yes, there was nothing here.

Anne: Tomato fields—

Jim: Right. McDonalds showed up in Gardenland-Northgate and that kind of inspired me to say, “Hey, this area is now climbing up the ladder, McDonald’s is here!”

Anne: *[Laughter]* Yes, that’s right! Maybe that will draw other people in.

Jim: Now maybe the banks will talk with us. That didn’t work; that was another bad, kind of downhill experience.

Anne: Yes, a challenge.

Jim: It was up the ladder four steps and four steps down.

Anne: Yes.

Jim: It has been an aggravating, but fun adventure.

[00:21:06]

Anne: Yes. The other day when Amy Takamura came out to introduce me to you so I could inquire about doing this oral history with you, she wanted to make sure that I also got to see the old cars.

Jim: Yes.

Anne: So you have restored some old cars?

Jim: Yes. We have some old cars that we restored that we’re saving for the grandkids.

Anne: Ok. She wanted to make sure I especially saw this one car. What is it?

Jim: A 1947 Cadillac limousine.

Anne: Its claim to fame is—

Jim: It used to belong to Governor Earl Warren.

Anne: Ok, so Governor Earl Warren had it.

Jim: Yes, when he became the judge, the supreme judge—

Anne: Very cool! So what are some of the other cars? There were three or four cars back there.

Jim: Yes, a ’64 Ford Galaxy, another ’41 Cadillac.

Anne: ’41 Cadillac did you say?

Jim: Yes, almost the same as the '47.

Anne: Did you say demo?

Jim: Limo.

Anne: Oh limo, ok. Very funny. You talked about some changes — what have you seen out here in Gardenland, Northgate, and Natomas?

Jim: Oh quite a bit. When I first came out here before starting the business '73-'74 there basically was not too many businesses on the Boulevard. Only on the right side of Northgate, that would be the east side.

Anne: Ok, on the east side of Northgate—

Jim: The west side was basically tomato fields.

Anne: Isn't there the differentiation that on the east side of what was Lower Marysville Blvd, now Northgate Blvd, it was called Gardenland and on the west side it was called Northgate?

Jim: Right. What was that called over there Timmy?

Anne: Yes, there was a name for the area across the way you're saying—

[00:24:15]

Jim: Yes. There were not too many businesses, or stores then — mostly bars, gas station. I remember a pizza parlor.

Anne: Dinler Dan's?

Jim: I remember Dinler Dan's. I think it was started around '76 or so. He wasn't here in the '50s, '60s.

Anne: Ok, he wasn't there yet then.

Jim: There was not any major development still in '74 — not until '75-'76.

Anne: Ok, then you were saying in the '80s was when Natomas really started developing.

Jim: Yes, in the '80s Natomas really took off — new homes, new businesses, new shopping centers. There were a lot of improvements on Northgate the end of the '70s, the '80s, '90s. Down that side—

Anne: Yes. Good. Right.

Jim: I left for a while, for the service and when I came back I couldn't believe the changes.

Anne: Yes. How about people that you have worked with or known? You were talking about the Baez family that lived next door...

Jim: Yes, Mr. Baez.

Anne: Yes, that's what you said you called him, Mr. Baez.

Jim: Yes, Mr. Baez helped me quite a bit.

Tim: At the end of the day he would call us over to the big house, offered us a beer and told us stories about Pancho Villa. We became good friends.

Jim: That house was built I think in 1914 and was possibly the first house built in Gardenland.

Anne: Who was in the Baez family that you remember? Ben's kids?

Jim: Ben's kids — who were they again? Ben—

Anne: So he had a Ben, Jr.?

Tim: Art, Fred—

Jim: What were their daughter's names?

Anne: Well, Madeline—

Jim: Right, Madeline—

Anne: Ok, so that family was really helpful.

Jim: Yes.

[00:26:37]

Anne: You were remembering also the names of other people living on Columbia Avenue that were really helpful.

Jim: Manny Martinez.

Anne: The Martinez family.

Jim: Yes, Manual used to come down and talk with me when I was here by myself and help me.

Anne: That was nice—

Jim: Yes, he used to help me.

Anne: Where was Manny in the line-up of the 11 kids? Was he in his teens?

Jim: No he was about 30. I don't think he was living with his parents, but maybe in his parent's old house. He later died in a plane crash.

Anne: Oh, he did — he died, sad. So when he was coming over here you were saying he was older than you. You were 25 and he was in his 30s.

Jim: Right. Mr. Baez had four cabins back there that he rented. The renters wouldn't bother me then.

Anne: Oh.

Jim: Sometimes they would help me also though. We had a lot of funny experiences during that time, too.

Anne: Hm. Some of the people would be older than you and possibly try to take advantage of you, a younger person starting a business.

Jim: Yes, there was one old gentleman however, Mr. Edwards, that would help us out, and teach us things. There were a lot of good people that helped us. Mr. Mike would come down from Mike's Market.

[00:29:59]

Anne: Oh, from Mike's Market, now La Superior.

Jim: He would come down and show us how to weld. Well, not really how to weld, we knew about that already, but he'd come down from the Market and spend time with us.

Tim: I remember one day when we were working on a tractor trying to weld a part. He said I needed to turn the amps up to make it hotter for a better result. I learned from him. I remember we also used our forklift down at his store to lift the AC units on to the roof for him. We paved his asphalt parking lot.

Amelia: Mike hired our two daughters, Dortha and Julie, who worked as cashiers in his store.

Anne: Oh, so your daughters worked there, nearby. You also paved his parking lot, the asphalt. It sounds like you were open to people coming down and sharing information. You would listen, learn and use some of what people had to offer.

Jim: Yes, they would come down, we would talk, and they would help, and tell some other people about us. Things got to be an open friendly type business; it became a place where people would gather.

Anne: It became a gathering place where people felt welcomed.

Jim: We were good at helping people. We donated often to local groups: baseball teams, Stanford Settlement. We got to know a lot of people.

Anne: If people were causing some trouble, you and Timmy would be here and they would listen to you and stop trouble-making pretty much? *[Nods]* Good.

Jim: People still come here all the time.

Anne: A home away from home, sort of.

Jim: Yes. I feel like we might not see someone for five years or so and then they come back, sort of like a magnet. Just all of a sudden out of nowhere they will pop in.

[00:33:29]

Anne: Just like this guy that's just walked up checking to see how you're doing. And a while ago the phone was ringing. People coming in to check on you, and wanting to talk business.

Anne: *[To the man who just walked in]* We're doing an interview on a recorder—

Man: Good morning, hey you haven't sold the place yet — oh, I'm sorry.

Anne: No, no problem. We were just saying how people just stop by and you're an example of that.

Man: These guys are such nice fellows—

Anne: Hi, and who are you?

Mr. Lopez: Hi, I'm Mario Lopez.

Anne: Hi, I'm Anne Ofsink from the Natomas Historical Society. They're part of history.

Mr. Lopez: These guys have a respect for people and life. They are like brothers.

Anne: Do you live out here?

Mr. Lopez: I live out in Rio Linda.

Anne: Jimmy you were pulling out some pictures here. You said you first used a trailer — so this is the office that you built later. You're not sure if you have a picture of the trailer. Well, we can look through some of these photos and decide which you feel like you might want us to copy to add them to the story. I'm so glad you pulled out that old album with these photos because they tell the story. Is there anything else specifically that you want to get on the tape? Oh, look at that picture of you in front of the sign.

Jim: I'm holding my son.

Anne: What is your son's name?

Jim: Jimmy.

Anne: Very nice.

[00:36:27]

Jim: There is a story about the sign. A guy went by when we were putting up the sign and said we needed a crest. He said, we'll make you a crest. He made a circle and on top he put the L/T in a crest. He said you're selling topsoil so you need to put that on. He then went on down the street.

Anne: It looks nice. You were receptive to his offer of help. That is a cool story. I'm sure he felt like he really contributed to your business. Who knows how many times he went by after that and could feel proud when seeing the finished sign.

Jim: Yes. I'm sure he's passed away now.

Anne: Look on these photos at all the empty space that was going to be filled up soon.

[00:38:27]

Tim: The bins on the north went in first, then the office, then the bins to the west and south. Finally the warehouse went in. After building the office we put in a leased redi-mix machine. It was hard work because we needed to carry the 94 pound cement bags up, open each one while breathing the cement dust. We loaded a conveyor belt with the sand and gravel from the filled bin, which came up on a conveyor belt to the hopper where the cement was added and were mixed together with water. You can see the original set-up in the picture. Later we designed a method that took out the need to manually lift the cement bags; a pallet filled with 30 bags of cement was lifted by a forklift to a catwalk we'd built. This method also worked better because the cement dust was only at the top. We designed a lot of methods to help us since we were short on money to buy new things. Sometimes we'd run out of propane for the forklift and if this happened on a weekend the only place to buy it was downtown which slowed us down. There are 4-5 bags of cement to one yard of redi-mix, depending on what the customer was pouring. Sidewalks took 4 bags a yard, driveways took 5 bags a yard. Back in those days we mixed 20+ yards on a weekend, sometimes even on one day. We leased from Snyder Leasing Company. After the concrete was ready it would go into a trailer which would be attached to the back of a pickup truck. Customers would complain because when they got to their work site, the mixture would have settled out a bit with the water coming to the top. It was difficult to mix it again on site.

Amelia: I was asked to dish soap, which was added and helped keep it mixed longer.

Tim: One day a guy came along and we talked with him about this problem. We said we need a flatbed trailer with a small portable mixer on top of it which would turn as the customer traveled to the work site. Fred Carron made a lot of money on that idea. Prior to this being available we bought two "third-wheel style" mixers. We should have only purchased one, as it didn't work out very well. The third wheel turned the mixer while the trailer was moving but then stopped when the customer got on site, which still posed problems. Before we were able to purchase the transportable mixers that we have now we leased this larger stationary mixer, which works really well for us.

Anne: The two of you know all the stories about what you have here. We'll touch base again, and about what photos you'd like to use. Would it be ok to ask your son Jimmy Jr. about how it was for him being raised in the business?

Jimmy Jr.: It's been fine.

Anne: Do you think you've learned anything?

Jimmy Jr.: I've learned things. It's been ok.

Amelia: They work really hard and are very creative. They figure things out with no money. Jim, my husband, is always thinking.

[00:39:16]

Jim: There were no sidewalks here either, during the time I started.

Anne: Oh really.

Jim: The sidewalks came in around 1976 I believe. Another funny thing is Granite Construction Company had a contract to put in the sidewalks. They came in – it was too big a project for the City. They wanted a place to park their equipment. It turned out to be that for letting them park on our property they did the final grading necessary for our lot.

Anne: That is very nice.

Jim: They also helped me hook up the sewer line.

Anne: Oh they did — nice! You helped them and they helped you.

Jim: Yes, Granite Construction, we got to know the foremen real well. We helped them and they helped us: they put in the sidewalks for us too.

Anne: Ok, so I'm going to turn the tape off. We'll figure out what photos we want and then get a closing statement. Thank you so much, too, Timmy.

Jim/Tim: You're welcome.

Related photographs and material in Longer's oral history folder:

- Longer's ad in the *South Natomas News*, December 1980
- "On the Boulevard - The Longer's: A Touching Story"
- Photograph of Longer's sign with the addition of the crest